

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson 8th December 2022 - Feast of the Immaculate Conception

It is quite extraordinary that during this year two books have either been given to me or one I found recently. One is called 'Jesus and the Jewish roots of Mary,' and the other is "A scientist researches Mary: The Ark of the Covenant." That book is 337 pages, and the other 200. But both of them give quite a section on this feast day.

Although many modern Christians, are quick to insist that Mary was just 'an ordinary woman' this was certainly not true of ancient Christians.

In ancient times, the parallels between Eve and Mary were widely recognised and led to the recognition that just as Eve had played a unique role in the fall of humanity, so Mary plays a unique role in its redemption.

Just a few quotes from ancient Christians living in the East and West.

'For Eve, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy (St Justin Martyr 100 AD)

'The knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the Virgin Mary set free through faith.' (St Irenaeus: c 170 AD)

'Let women praise her, the pure Mary, that as in Eve their mother –great was their reproach – lo in Mary their sister –greatly magnified was their honour. (Ephrem the Syrian: 4th cent)

'Death came through a virgin, Eve. It was necessary that life should also come through a spotless virgin (St.Cyril of Jerusalem 4th C)

There were more. What a remarkable symphony of ancient voices. These quotations are not from a few marginal writers: they are from Christians writing in Greek, Latin and Syriac, living in the Holy Land, Africa, Asia- Minor and Europe.

For this reason St John Henry Newman wrote; **"The great rudimental teaching of Antiquity from the earliest date about Mary is that she is the Second Eve.**

The Eastern Church celebrated the feast as early as the 7th cent. and wrote that for the Greeks the expression Immaculate Conception meant Mary, from the first moment of her life was preserved from sin. It is taught that whereas actual sin is a deliberate personal transgression of God's Law, original sin is inherited and transmitted at conception to the descendants of Adam and Eve, who as father and mother of the human family sinned.

We, their children, were then deprived of the supernatural destiny and of the gift of sanctifying grace, and Christ demands that we be born again of water and the Spirit in baptism (Jesus conversation with Nicodemus: John 3)

The inherited stain of original sin thus differs from the stain of personal sin which is committed not contracted. The first Adam was born sinless, Christ was the second Adam: he too was immaculate and sinless. Why then is it so difficult to suppose that Mary the second Eve was also immaculate at birth? Surely God' logic would demand that the second Eve should also be Immaculate.

That Mary was also preserved from personal sin, theologians admit, for as St Augustine said: "The honour of Christ forbids the least hesitation on the subject of possible sin by his mother. St Bonaventure said: 'It was becoming that the Blessed Virgin Mary, by whom the devil was to be conquered should never, even for a moment, have been under his dominion.

St John Damascene put it this way: 'The serpent never had any access to this Paradise!'

Eventually the understanding of Mary as a second Eve led to the realisation that Mary, like Eve herself was created without sin. The logic behind this belief is quite simple:

If Mary is really the new Eve, then she must be greater than Eve.

Apparitions of the Immaculate Conception of Mary come from her apparition in Guadeloupe in 1531. In 1830 to Catherine Laboure in Rue de Bac Paris, ‘O Mary conceived without sin pray for us who have recourse to thee. The Miraculous medal was initially called the medal of the Immaculate Conception

28 years later to Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, apparitions began on 11 Feb. 1858, and on 25th March, Annunciation Day, Our Lady confirmed the declared dogma of 1854. She announced to Bernadette that day “I am the Immaculate Conception”.

That very same day our new cathedral in Plymouth was opened and dedicated to Our Lady and St Boniface.

Important she did not say “I am the result of an immaculate conception, or I am she who was conceived immaculate.” She made a most authoritative, definitive and personalized statement “I am the Immaculate Conception.

As W R Ainsworth said; “To those who might question this manner of identifying herself, one could reply that it seems to run in the family since her Son Jesus also declared “*I am the resurrection and the Life.*”

The Virgin chose the date for her last apparition to Bernadette. It was the 16th July 1858. The Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Mount Carmel is the mount in Israel where the Israelites, through the prophet Elijah, renewed their covenant with God. Elijah’s cave is there, which we saw only a few weeks ago (*on our Diocesan pilgrimage*), and Elijah defeated all the prophets of Baal.

Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us.

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